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WASHINGTON CLOSE-UP*The U.S. 'Illusion of Omnipotence'*

By FRANK GETLEIN

The ancient wisdom expressed in the line, "O that mine enemy would write a book," is not an absolute. It depends entirely on how good your enemy is at writing books. The varied examples of Norman Mailer and Jim Bishop to the contrary, it is possible to write a good one.

Senator Eugene J. McCarthy, D-Minn., has just written one and it is hard to see how his enemies — or the enemies of the general position he advocates — can derive much pleasure or profit from the fact. The book is called "The Limits of Power," and the very title must seem a contradiction in terms to such enemies. Yet in lucid language, in brief compass, the last Stevensonian conducts a brilliant analysis of our present foreign policy, how we got where we are, why we ought to reconsider our position and what we really ought to be doing in the world of men and nations.

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The book is not calculated to offend anybody, but it is fairly sure to offend the Republicans, the Kennedyites and the Johnsonians. Senator McCarthy has thus assured himself of a great future in the Farm-Labor Party of his native upper Midwest, except for the fact that the party doesn't really exist anymore.

In the senator's compressed summary of the years since World War II, we have drifted into the illusion of omnipotence in foreign policy, partly by accident, partly by self-righteous design, mostly because we didn't know what we were doing and still don't.

The last good times, in this view of our history in the

world for the last two decades, were with Truman and Acheson, the latter a classical, therefore conservative, shaper of foreign policy. They were succeeded by Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, the latter a stern and rockbound moralist and fighter of Communist devils.

Dulles did two things that still take their toll. He established a worldwide system of treaties that gives us the theoretical justification to do anything, anywhere, anytime, to anyone that pleases us. And he allowed the CIA, under his brother Allen, to become the quasi-independent, policymaking, operation-mounting entity that it is.

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The author doesn't say so, but the account is clear that John F. Kennedy was simply too dumb to realize what was going on and allowed it to continue. Obviously, you aren't supposed to imply that kind of thing about saints and martyrs. Perhaps the most damning judgment in the book is the judgment that no judgment is yet possible on Rusk: after six years in office he remains an unknown. Yet the policy set by the Dulles brothers continues to shape our ends, rough hew them as we will. It is a policy based on the belief that communism is always evil and always the same and always to be opposed or "contained" by us in any way necessary.

Senator McCarthy is keenly aware of the inertia factor in government at large and in foreign policy in particular. He feels that much of our present trouble comes from inertia, the dead weight of vested interest that keeps

policy going in all areas long after its original purpose in one area has been fulfilled or abandoned.

The underlying thesis is simply that no nation can run the world singlehandedly and it is high time we stopped trying.

It is an extremely attractive possibility that emerges in the final pages, an America that would base its foreign policy on close examination and constant re-examination of the way things actually are in the numerous parts of the world, an examination steadily illuminated by the knowledge that there are limits to what power can do, any power. He concludes, "America's contribution to world civilization must be more than a continuous performance demonstrating that we can police the planet."

Yes, we can all agree, it must be. But will it be? Can it be?

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The melancholy answer is probably in Senator McCarthy's note that the personal mark of his book, if any, is "that which I believe Adlai Stevenson would have made on American foreign policy, had his ideas and his attitudes been translated into political reality."

We all know what happened to those ideas and attitudes, first at the hands of the electorate and second at the hands of his own party in victory.

But even beyond that question of whether, there is the question of how. As others have so often in history, we are finding in Vietnam that the only hard part about going for a ride on a tiger is getting off.